



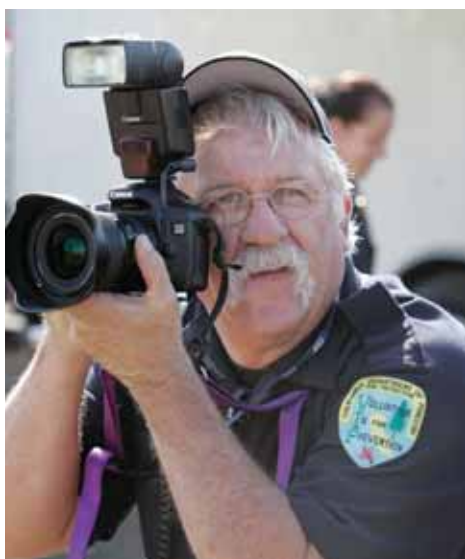
FIRE SIEGE

Perspective: Through the Lens

By Wes Schultz, Photographer, Communications



"Firefighters from all over the Southwest, including Mexico, came together and worked as one doing the best job they knew how."



Wes Schultz has been in the fire service for over 40 years starting with CAL FIRE many years ago and retired as an Assistant Chief with the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District. Here is his account of the Fire Siege while taking photographs in Southern California for CAL FIRE.

For the past few years I've volunteered out of CAL FIRE headquarters as a Volunteer In Prevention taking photographs for the department.

On Sunday, Oct. 21 Public Information Officer Daniel Berlant called me from Sacramento Headquarters. He asked if I would be able to go to Southern California to photograph the rapidly, developing fires. Without hesitation I said, of course I would!

News was starting to hit the Sacramento area concerning the fires down South. I had already started pacing the floor and packing.

The plane out of Sacramento scheduled for 6:30 p.m. was delayed so I didn't get to San Diego until around 11:30 p.m. While flying over Southern California just before landing I saw the fires from the plane's window. Then I heard the pilot talking over the speakers pointing out the fires seen below and trying to explain what was happening on the ground.

From the air, the Southern California sky was covered in smoke and I started wondering which one was the Harris Fire. All I knew was I was to report to the Harris Fire near a town called Jamul.



"There were so many untold stories of human beings, called firefighters, going way beyond their call to duty."



I arrived at Jamul, Station 66, around midnight. The glow of the fire was visible over the hills. Of course I wanted to go out right then and there, but I said to myself, "slow down."

I really didn't think the crews fighting fires that night needed a retired flatland firefighter traveling alone in a four-door, compact KIA (no real firefighter would ever drive a KIA) who had no idea about the lay of the land. So I spent the night in the KIA.

Early the next morning, I checked in with CAL FIRE Captain Julie Hutchinson lead PIO for the Harris Fire. Julie got me hooked up with CAL FIRE Captain Ruben Hernandez, Division W at the time, for orientation. After that I was off wishing I was still a young firefighter, mixing it up with the best of them.

I went down and got many great images of firefighters doing an incredible job. But what I noticed as much as fire operations was the way firefighters, of all ranks, worked in the field and did their jobs. Firefighters from all over the Southwest, including Mexico, worked as one doing the best job they knew how. There was little, if any, agency parochialism that was alive and well when I was a young

"I would bet there were thousands, of acts of bravery and going beyond that will never be written down or awards given. Firefighters are that way – 'I was just doing my job'."

firefighter. When a job was identified, it got done. It didn't matter what color the apparatus was, what agency, state or country they came from. Firefighters talked to one another and helped one another. The foe was the fire, not one another.

You simply had to be there to experience the dedication of all the firefighters I ran into. There was one young, CAL FIRE firefighter whose eyes were so bloodshot I thought he was going to bleed out - right then and there. He had been going strong for three days with little sleep and meals on the run - and wanting more. He was just one of many in the same situation and frame of mind. I didn't hear one complaint as to the working conditions, very long hours or extreme weather conditions - well, maybe a grumble or two about the weather. Firefighters understood the entire south state was burning and they were a part of a true statewide disaster.

In many cases, the news media tried to spin a negative on the entire operation. Whenever I saw the media approach a firefighter and ask what was going wrong,

the firefighter would respond, "Other than the drought, high temperatures, up to 100 mph winds and fire all over area - nothing." Then the firefighter would go back to fighting fire.

There were so many untold stories of firefighters going way beyond the call to duty. I would bet there were thousands of acts of bravery and beyond that, which will never be written down nor awards given. Firefighters are that way—'I was just doing my job'. If you factored in all the fires, all the firefighters, law enforcement, Red Cross, EMS, local citizens who helped out their neighbors, youth groups, civic groups, etc, the count would be in the millions .

This event showed people truly helping people. I thought to myself, man have we come a long way since I was a kid just starting out in the fire service. I came away from the Harris Fire so proud I was a firefighter and still involved with fire service in some way. Every citizen in the State of California should be full of pride with the amount of positive actions that came together during a true state disaster.

below: Volunteer in Prevention Photographer, Wes Schultz, poses with CBS Evening News host Katie Couric.

